
Environmental Hotels - Green or Greenwash?

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The rush for 'green' credentials and kudos has many people asking questions – and none more so than the travelling public. The travel industry as a whole is drawing both praise and criticism for its impact on the environment. Carbon-burners like airlines, road transport and cruise ships are under scrutiny for their obvious greenhouse gas emissions, but hotels and resorts are not immune either.

Luxury travel is seen, with some justification, as indulgent and pampering with scant regard paid to the consequences of such hedonistic and selfish actions. Golf courses suck fresh water from precious reserves while locals gather drinking water in leaky buckets. Outdoor floodlights illuminate empty tennis courts as nearby barefooted villagers cook over smoky stoves and candlelight. We've all seen it.

As probing and questioning eyes fall upon the hospitality industry, the industry is responding with various mechanisms and programs, some genuinely practical and effective – others less so.

Accor recently announced a new twist to the 'hang your towel for re-use' practice common in most hotels around the world. Touted by some as a 'save the planet' action, most guests quickly see through this request as simply a means to save the hotel money and boost profit rather than as some altruistic gesture.

Acknowledging this, Accor has introduced a formula to determine how much savings can be made through towel re-use and pledged to donate these funds to UNEP's reforestation programme.

According to their media statement, to prepare for the full-scale introduction, Accor is offering special training for housekeepers and is planning a campaign to build awareness among guests, who will be personally encouraged to take part in the program through a message posted in their bathrooms informing them that "Here, your towels plant trees."

"The project should enable us to finance the planting of three million trees by 2012," said Gilles Péliisson, Accor Chief Executive Officer. "I am very proud that the Group is actively supporting the United Nations Environment Programme in this reforestation project, which involves operators and customers of all our hotel brands, from economy to luxury."

Accor's program also receives the glowing endorsement of the UNEP.

"All countries are concerned by deforestation," said Achim Steiner, Executive Director of UNEP. "With this reforestation project, Accor is also helping to combat global warming, restore ecosystems, wipe out epidemics and preserve the planet's fresh water."

Even if the money were not going to replant trees, the reduction in waste water and chemical use is a small but real gesture any hotel or motel can make.

Although reforestation is a critical activity in many areas, trees planted today will take at least twenty years to reach maturity. The critics will argue that attention needs to be directed at "now" schemes. What can we do to reduce and offset emissions today?

Marriott, a US\$13 billion-a-year company has pledged to donate \$2 million over the next three years to encourage Brazilian natives not to chop down trees. Through the Sustainable Amazon Foundation, a newly-formed non-profit organization, Marriott will also solicit contributions from its employees and hotel guests who want to offset their carbon footprint and help save the Amazon.

A novel mechanism employed by the historic Badrutt's Hotel in St. Moritz was to install a massive heat pump plant utilising the vast water reserves of the lake. When it came time to replace the hotel's aging oil-fired heaters, it was calculated that by harnessing the heat reserves from the lake water, 475000 litres of heating oil would be saved annually. Additionally, St. Moritz has also installed an extensive array of solar panels around the town leading them to claim the town makes renewable energy not only sensible, but "chic and sexy."

Hilton Hotels, on a 'save energy' drive for over a decade, says it has delivered savings of over 10 per cent last year across more than 80 hotels in Europe as well as cutting water consumption by five percent. The 'we care!' initiative, which involves a suite of global actions and targets, has saved the company almost \$10 million and instilled a new environmental culture targeting waste, chemicals, energy and water.

Frank Hubbard is the Director of Sustainability, InterContinental Hotels Group ANZSP and says that part of IHG's philosophy, and an essential component of implementing sound environmental practices, is to provide relevant training and resources.

All these schemes and claims sound great, but who is out there to 'keep the blighters honest.' What accreditation program or benchmarking exists?

AAA Tourism, the STAR raters, make the refreshingly candid assertion that "recent research has confirmed that consumers have a keen interest in properties that are environmentally friendly. Two out of three say a Green endorsement would positively impact their decision on which accommodation to choose." So 'Green Star' is born, encouraging members to self-assess their property and get a \$225 marketing pack with tips on how to promote their new 'environmentally friendly' status.

AAA Tourism go on to point out that their Green Star is not an alternative to the better known Green Globe standard, merely a stepping stone to the internationally recognised travel and tourism certification system.

"Green STAR Accreditation is an entry level program for all accommodation operators who wish to reduce the environmental impact of their business; particularly those running small businesses that don't have vast sums of money to implement costly initiatives. Green STAR is by no means as demanding as Green Globe's Certification; however a number of practical standards must be met to alleviate pressure on the environment. Put simply, 1000 Green STAR Accredited properties is a far better outcome for the environment than only handful of properties meeting the most rigorous standards," says Paul Baumgartner, National Manager of STAR Ratings.

Green Globe, according to their website, "aims to deliver the best travel and tourism benchmarking and certification products and services in the world, which facilitate sustainable travel and tourism for companies, communities, ecotourism operations and precincts." Note keywords; "products" and "deliver", so Green Globe recognise that green is good business.

Despite the onerous compliance, Heritage Hotels in eco-conscious New Zealand have tackled this head-on and achieved Green Globe benchmarking since 2002. (see break out for their eco-tips)

Another benchmarking program with a respected profile is the home-grown Eco Certification Program from Ecotourism Australia. More rigorous than even Green Globe's strict criteria, Ecotourism Australia were recently awarded the World Travel and Tourism Council's "Tourism for Tomorrow" Award for Conservation at the World Tourism Summit in Dubai.

"Ecotourism Australia's Chairman, Mr Alastair McCracken, said the comprehensive ECO Certification program was a world first when it was introduced in 1995 and the Australian ecotourism industry can be proud of the way it embraced this initiative with its many stringently audited criteria to ensure environmental, economic and cultural sustainability."

"This program is now an inspiration worldwide as governments and tourism operators seek to measure and manage the environmental impact of human activity," Mr McCracken said.

Realistically, very few small accommodation operators will be able to achieve Ecotourism Australia standards.

The danger with moving reactively to pressure from environmental criticism is to adopt measures that appear green but have little real impact, with the imperative to be seen to be green more important than implementing actual reductions in emissions or waste.

At a recent ANTOR seminar in Sydney, media spokesman for Choice Magazine, Christopher Zinn, warned the travel industry not to fall into the trap that attracts the attention of his ferociously impartial magazine, namely to make unsubstantiated and unsupported claims.

"In the UK recently, the giant Shell oil company was taken to task by the advertising watchdog for a series of advertisements that pictured flowers sprouting from oil refineries," said Zinn, "and they found that this was likely to mislead the public."

The consequences of being 'outed' for misleading advertising are many; negative public relations, damaged credibility and big fines to name the obvious ones.

Kris Madden of the Eco Media Group, is a consultant to government and industry on strategic communication as well as eco- and sustainable tourism, has the same warning.

"Although I acknowledge the contribution of the travel industry to global warming, I'm still more than a little suspicious of all these carbon offset schemes popping up," warns Madden, "there is no framework of operation, no benchmarks and no real checks and balances under which these schemes operate. One has to wonder whether there is a real environmental

benefit from some of them, or whether it's just 'greenwash'."

In the fierce competition for consumer sentiment, true carbon consciousness and fuzzy green schemes will be difficult to isolate as more and more businesses fly the "carbon neutral" flag and put green stickers on their windows.

"Sure, it's better than doing nothing and it certainly raises awareness of the problem, but I fear it is more important for some of the worst offenders to be seen to be reacting to the climate change issue than actually making a difference."

There is the danger that the cost of offsetting carbon consumption will simply disappear into the cost structure of business and the true intention of greenhouse gas reduction at source will be lost. Carbon trading is big business and getting bigger. According to carbon trader Guy Oilan of Cleaner Climate, the global carbon "market" is worth US\$92 billion and growing and is currently valuing one tonne of carbon emission at A\$40. So where does the money go?

"Cleaner Climate only develops and supports projects with independently certified and measured emission reductions," says Oilan, "Our projects adhere to the standards, processes and requirements of the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanism and The Voluntary Carbon Standard. An example is the WISE wind farm in Karnataka, India, eliminating 2,532 tonnes of CO2 annually."

To simply and cynically view 'green' as the new 'black' without moderating our habits and behaviour at both macro- and micro- level is to trivialise the climate change issue.

"Climate change is one of the biggest challenges facing the world today and how we respond will shape the lives of future generations," says IHG CEO, Andy Cosslett.

HM will continue to monitor develops in this field and report regularly on green initiatives and climate change abatement in the hospitality industry.